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# Review of E.L. Mayo's Poems by Ben Howard

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E.L. Mayo. *Collected Poems*. Edited by David Ray. A New Letters Book from Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio., 1982, 272 pp. \$17.50, cloth, \$9.95, paper.

"Poetry," E.L. Mayo once remarked, "is predominantly the world of likeness . . . the corrective of the second law of thermodynamics through whose action our intellectual as well as our physical possessions get more and more scattered about."<sup>1</sup> One notes with regret that in the three decades since Mayo made this remark, the poems of this masterful craftsman have themselves gotten more and more scattered about. At the time of his death in 1979, Mayo left behind him four collections of poems. All these books have been out of print for some time, and Mayo's poems are not to be found in the standard anthologies. We are fortunate to have David Ray's new edition, which gathers uncollected and unpublished work as well as the contents of *The Diver*, *The Center is Everywhere*, and *Summer Unbound* and incorporates the revisions Mayo made for his *Selected Poems* (1973). Not only does this new edition call attention to a fine mid-century poet whose work has been neglected, it also makes the unity of Mayo's work more apparent. Surveying these poems of some forty years, whose subjects range from art, love, and the play of the mind to poverty, aging, and the threat of nuclear war, from patterns in the cosmos to the task of washing diapers, one discovers a singular, consistent vision, a view of life that is at once scholarly and comic, romantic and bitterly realistic. And one sees, that for all his talk of being scattered, Mayo held a remarkably steady course, guided by an ancient conception of the poet and his role.

For to Mayo, the poet was first and last a knower, whose task was to delve into things, to tunnel to their centers. With Gerard Manley Hopkins, Mayo saw the poet's vocation as a search for the inner life of things, a quest for their "inscape." And in a poem addressed to Hopkins ("Poem for Gerard"), Mayo urges concentrated meditation, arguing that "to hear things speak themselves in their sole tongue," the heart must become "deaf to itself and dumb," and the eye must go "in to their root and onward to their end/Perishing with their vanishing to span/From germ to the full grain/Mountain or martyr, chestnut-leaf or man." One late poem speaks of looking "deeply into, through/Men, women, boys, girls for traces/Of *ens* in their fixed faces"; and throughout Mayo's work

one finds the metaphor of knowledge as sight—or, more precisely, of knowledge as seeing *through* things, knowledge as penetration. The poet-knower becomes a spy, a mole in a tunnel, or, most memorably, a diver, in whose brain “the jungles of the sea must flower still.”

But it is no mere jungle that the poet discovers. It is a hidden connectedness or buried order. Mayo was in several ways a pessimist, but he was no absurdist or nihilist. On the contrary, he believed, with Blake, that beneath the scattered and disjointed surfaces of things, enduring forms and patterns could be found. Observing trees coated with ice after a storm, their skeletal structures visible beneath transparent sheaths, he finds evidence that “soul is form and does the body make”; and he confesses his belief that “the forms of things endure and glister through” (“Ice Storm”). Elsewhere, combining two recurrent metaphors in his work, he reports an intimation of a pattern, a sense “Of soft threads weaving day by day/A certain web a certain way . . .” (“The Angel”). The poet’s task is to perceive the web: to recover lost connections. “A good poem about anything,” he noted in his journal in 1961, “reminds us of our lost unity and impels us to seek it.”

One of Mayo’s early poems expresses his guiding beliefs. It is almost a credo. The poem evokes the twilight hour, a time of heightened awareness for the speaker, who finds himself brooding on the cycle of death and regeneration:

What you desire not starlight nor tearose  
Breathing at evening from the bush by the house  
Tells, nor does the dialect of water  
Hissing from the faucet or the hose  
Gossip of your loss.

They keep your secret well until you die,  
And as the colors of the evening sky  
Burn to darkness down, each solemn color  
That blesses you before it turns its shoulder  
Is tacit with your ghost.

Huge as the night with stars above your house  
These patterns laid on emptiness revolve  
Beyond all searching; seeds you scatter strive,  
Determined things, beyond the studious

Solicitudes of love.

This night and every night they dance in fire,  
These patterns of the slayer and the slain,  
And now a cock with half his feathers gone  
Crows for a dawn he shall not see again  
And cannot but desire.

(“In the Web”)

This elegant meditation represents the style and the concerns of Mayo’s early poems. To a contemporary ear the sonorous pentameters sound rather formal and forbidding, and the complex suspenseful syntax, together with the rhymes, call to mind the stanzas of John Crowe Ransom.

But the poem is somewhat deceptive. On second look, one sees that the rhymes are not so regular as they seem. They are arranged so as to *suggest* regularity—a device, Mayo once told me, he had learned from Milton. And the poem as a whole is a fusion of formal and informal, personal and impersonal elements. It is, in part, a quiet celebration of what Mayo called the “bright privacies” of the inner life. But it is also a forceful confession of faith: a luminous vision, in which the poet intimates links between the inner life and the natural order. The rooster’s impending death and his desire for life mirror the poet’s own. And the poet’s scattered seeds, like his secret desires, play their parts in a hidden cosmic pattern.

Many of Mayo’s early poems dwell on the bright privacies of the inner life, whether it be the spiritual inwardness of figures in El Greco’s paintings or the solitary life of Robinson Crusoe, who studies “every unwatered word beneath the mind.” In later poems, however, Mayo turns his attention to social and political themes, looking outward at Europe, where “all production fawns on war,” and later, at the bleak postwar landscape, where “all who thought to find/Love in the waste of time between wars . . . Gnawed/the cotton bread of unison,” and where, overhead, “the doves but half concealed/Atomic preparations. . . .” Of the many poems which deal with cultural and social themes, one of the most memorable is an elegy for Simone Weil. The poem is both a tribute to Weil and a lament for a fractured culture. It is also an existential parable:

## The Dial and the Mole

*In Memoriam: Simone Weil 1909-1943*

What the common basis was, both at home  
and abroad is not easy to define. In those  
days it was unnecessary to formulate it; at  
the present time it becomes impossible to  
formulate.

—T.S. Eliot,

*The Unity of European Culture*

Quite casually we nodded, shared in talk  
Whatever occurred to us, and still the lull  
Grew like a bubble till it held all:  
Your house, my house; your children on this lawn,  
Mine on the other lawn, and in between  
As far as we could see there was no line,  
Picket, or privet-hedge, or wire wall—  
Only this common sundial where you  
Sometimes told the time and I too  
Divided us. There was no other world.

Then, overnight, all split; each hemisphere  
Shut sharply in the better to exclude  
All but one view: its own. In every skull  
The fissure deepened, yawned interminable,  
And every loyal citizen thriftily shored  
His neighbor's ruins. Only a little mole  
That crept unnoticed under either wall  
Too late to matter, treasonous to mind,  
As winter deepened the dividing line,  
Lived in the country of the sundial.

Louis MacNeice, in his *Varieties of Parable*, invents the term “sleight-of-hand” to describe fictions, such as Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which at first appear naturalistic but turn out to be symbolic. One thinks of Mac-

Neice's term in reading the first stanza of Mayo's poem, where the poet appears to be telling an anecdote or recalling a neighborly conversation. In fact, Mayo is shrewdly preparing us for the visionary mode of the second stanza, where the images of sundial, mole and wall take on symbolic proportions. Mayo's treatment of the "common sundial" is equally artful. A common point of reference becomes an instrument of division.

It is no accident that Mayo chose a passage from Eliot as his epigraph and alluded playfully to Eliot's famous line about ruins and fragments. Mayo was born in 1904. He read *The Waste Land* as a young man, and the poem, he once remarked, threw him for a loop. Like many poets and critics of his generation, he seems to have been haunted by Eliot's vision of empty cisterns and psychic fragmentation, and he shared Eliot's need to reconstruct connections with the past. In one brief meditative lyric, written in the relaxed conversational style of his later work, Mayo envisions a thread of continuity reaching back to the Pharaohs:

The word of water spoke a wavy line  
To the Egyptians; we can also hear  
Variations from the strict linear  
In fall and faucet, pail and ice-pitcher.  
Whether in fountain or in porcelain  
It speaks a speech so crystal in its chime  
We never think to question this cold  
Transparent wanderer from the underworld  
About the dead,—whose resurrection fills  
More than half the earth uttering a word  
That no man living has interpreted.

("The Word of Water")

In this poem Mayo's fluid pentameters suit his purpose, as do his casual rhymes and his vague historical allusion. Together they create a gentle evocative daydream, in which ancient and modern cultures, living man, the earth, and the dead are mysteriously joined.

And the poem uncovers links of another kind. It makes connections between homely domestic objects—pail, faucet, ice pitcher—and mysterious cosmic forces. Mayo once said that in our century it is the task

of the poet to mediate “between the space-time continuum which the scientists report and the world of ham-on-rye which we can perceive for ourselves.” And, as if to fulfill that obligation, his imagery moves freely from garden hoses to patterns-laid-on-emptiness, from picket fences and children at play to visions of cultural disorder. Similarly, his diction moves fluently from the abstract to the concrete, or from the Latinate to the colloquial. In “Fiscal Year: A Report,” for instance, we hear of an “up-ended truck on the embankment,” which attests to “the fiscal year’s/*Risus sardonius*, the tight fit/Of things around the heart.” The poem ends with the observation that

We who have worked so hard and gone so far  
To be invulnerable say  
The whole business of being invulnerable

Seems in a very bad way.

Of course, such incongruities can generate humor and satire as well as insight. Mayo was keenly aware of such possibilities, and toward the end of his life, as his style became more informal and his lineation more idiosyncratic, his dry, ironic sense of humor—which was always evident in conversation—made itself more evident in his poetry. At times Mayo’s humor could be understated, as when he warns a newborn child that “corners of bookcases will be unkind.” At other times, it could be sardonic, as when he informs us that his hometown (Malden, Massachusetts) was “detoured by Paul Revere.” But quite often Mayo’s humor evoked Democritus, or perhaps Erasmus. His view was more often comic than satiric; and sometimes the joke was at his own expense. Here is his portrait of himself as an elderly man:

From the bland, snow-cruled eminence  
Of sixty I speak to you remarking only  
That if one has always wanted to be invisible  
Sixty’s a good place to be. Here one puts on,  
Without the least strain, an impersonation  
Of somebody who is only in a manner of speaking  
There—hence, an excellent location  
For looking far more deeply into, through  
Men, women, boys, girls for traces

Of *ens* in their fixed faces,  
While their patrolling and transparent eyes  
Pass over the impenetrable disguise  
Of a mild smiling Cheshire gentleman  
Cat of sixty fading softly away.  
So my first taste of growing invisible  
Is full of growing light, and yet I fear  
That when such marginal opacity  
As in me is dissolves to earth and air,  
My vision will continue to expand  
Brobdingnagian  
Until I comprehend all humankind  
Without being there.

(“On Growing Invisible”)

For anyone who had the pleasure of hearing E.L. Mayo read his work aloud, these lines may awaken a memory of the man himself. One thinks of the animated eyebrows and the furrowed forehead, the capricious eyes behind forbidding glasses, the bent pipe and the wryly ironic smile. Is this poem itself an impenetrable disguise, masking the dread of extinction and the painful sense of being discarded? Perhaps it is. But the darker feelings come through in spite of the bright mask—or even, perhaps, because of it. And the allusions to Swift and Carroll strengthen the effect, lending an ironic, bemused, faintly incredulous tone.

Irony and masks are out of fashion these days, and one wonders whether this poem and others like it in Mayo’s collection will find favor with contemporary readers. Mayo once observed that his generation of American poets had taken its lessons from T. S. Eliot, and that my own generation would go to school with William Carlos Williams. Nearly twenty years have passed since Mayo made that observation, and if it now seems overstated, it also points to the gap which divides the ironic, difficult, formal poetry of Mayo’s generation from the earnest informal work prevalent in the magazines today. One hopes that these differences will not cost Mayo the readers he deserves. In his lifetime Mayo was a sensitive teacher, and in his poems he still has much to teach, not only about the art that conceals art but also about the imaginative freedoms possible within traditional constraints. For Mayo was as much the visionary as the ironist, and his vision of the numinous was as acute as his



sense of human limitations. He could be as empirical and sceptical as the next man, but he was most convincing and original when writing about things unseen. In Mayo's best poems, as in the meditations of Traherne, familiar objects take on a spiritual radiance; and invisible presences—the web of life, the word of water—come to seem familiar. To this wise and prescient poet, the world's surfaces masked buried mysteries. And at his urging, reclusive forms assumed the lineaments of known companions.

## NOTES

1 Mayo made this remark in an interview with John Ciardi in 1950. The interview and a selection of Mayo's poems may be found in Ciardi's *Mid-Century American Poets* (New York: Twayne, 1950), where E.L. Mayo appears with such poets as Jarrell, Wilbur, Roethke, Lowell, Bishop, Eberhart, and Delmore Schwartz.